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THEOLOGICAL OBSCURANTISM

Obscurantism is defined as both a "tendency" to prevent inquiry and enlightenment, and as a "desire" to do this. In the following pages it will be used as descriptive only of the tendency, and this as a tendency of thought. If persons are mentioned or referred to, they are believed to be animated by no desire to prevent enlightenment. They are sincerely attached to what they think truth. They have not been convinced by what they have heard of modern objections to their positions. Possibly they have not fully appreciated the force or seen the bearing of these objections. They feel called upon to defend sacred truth against attacks. They defend it against the attacks they see and the objections they feel. They are holding the citadel till help shall arrive; and they doubtless feel that in due time another philosophy will take possession of the thinking world, and that the present attacks upon the faith will be seen to be as unreal and ill-judged even by their present foes as they are now by themselves. But it is the object of this paper to show that, in the cases discussed, which are to be taken as samples of innumerable other cases, these defenders of the faith, often its called and commissioned defenders, are really opposing enlightenment; that such is their "tendency"; and that they are darkening counsel by words without knowledge.

The antagonism to the current evangelical theology on the part of the modern world, that is, of thinking men who are conversant with the progress of modern knowledge and with the methods by which it has been acquired, has a threefold root. One of these divisions may be described as a new theory of the universe. This is the evolutionary theory. God is conceived as operating according to fixed laws and by resident forces in every realm of life. As a theory of the origination of the present living forms, it is opposed to the idea of specific creation. As a theory of life under law it is opposed to the idea of a succession of crises. Even earthquakes are believed to have their laws. The religious life and nature of man are placed by this theory under the scheme an orderly development, which excludes belief in interference, even for such an object as man's salvation. Revelation is assimilated to the method by which God has given man his knowledge of the forces of material nature, such as electricity. Man has studied and learned in the one sphere as the other, and with the same kind of help from God. And while the possibility of such events as miracles is not denied by

modern thought, they are regarded, inasmuch as they set aside the laws of nature for a time and to a degree, as highly improbable.

A second branch of the root is the modern conception of proof. This is first a conception of facts. It may be said that our traditional theology, like all the early thinking of men, is seriously marred by its entire lack of a conception of what facts are, and how a knowledge of them is to be obtained. Any bright idea, not too obviously contradicted by some quite proximate fact, has passed muster as a truth, and has been made the basis of an argument. The laborious methods of the laboratory to determine what the facts actually are were not only unknown to early theologians and unimitated by them, but to the present day have remained equally unappreciated, if not unknown, and generally unimitated by the expounders and defenders of theological systems. Darwin once planted some seeds and watched every one of the one hundred and fifty plants which came up, and made notes on their life histories. This was to get the facts as to some minute point of investigation. And when the facts have been ascertained, the methods of proof are rigid to a degree of which theology has no conception. Whatever may be true of the philosophical speculations which have accompanied natural science, or of theories which scientific men themselves would call peripheral, and of no practical importance, when it comes to a fact or a principle upon which scientific reasoning is to be built up, it is the habit of the modern times to demand cogent proof. Often it is said that a man ought not to believe a position if he can doubt it; by which is meant that, if a principle is to be made the basis of reasoning by which other truth is to be discovered or defended, it must be supported by evidence which compels belief. Otherwise the thing based upon it will probably be incorrect, and certainly can never be known to be true. There is no more truth in the conclusion than there was in the premises. Hence modern thought is hard to be convinced, but equally hard to be refuted.

The third root is the body of results already arrived at by scientific workers in all departments of human thought. History, for instance, yields an ever-growing body of convincing truth upon the basis of the evolutionary supposition, in consequence of the treatment of historical sources under the conception of the uniformity of history, that it has always proceeded under the same great forces as are now carrying it forward. The greatest argument against miracles is that they do not occur in our own day. Hence the historian is inclined to say they never did. The realm of the merely mysterious has been steadily contracted

under the researches of science till we are strongly inclined to believe that a law will finally be found for everything without exception, authenticated miracles with all the rest. And historical methods have shown us that most so-called miracles have no proper authentication or attestation, and cannot be placed upon the standing of historical facts. The study of sociology, a field coinciding at many points with theology, has increased our confidence in the spiritual forces of society as competent to carry on the task of religious renovation and progress, and at the same time deepen our understanding of the meaning of evolution. Psychology has had the same effect. The persuasion is mounting that we have in our modern world of thought, a new body of truth, possessed of a new and altogether unanticipated degree of certainty, and also—and here is the nub of the matter—diametrically opposed to certain important presuppositions of traditional theology. This, then, is the modern objection to the evangelical system of theology: in its fundamental conception, in its methods, and in its characteristic concrete results, it has been superseded, as defective, when not positively wrong, by another system, which is at essential points its direct antithesis.

Under such circumstances the problem of modern theology must be and ought to be *to learn the truth*; and of modern apologetics *to defend the truth*, and incidentally to win over the objecting parties to an acceptance of evangelical principles. But it sometimes seems as if apologists, ostrich-like, thought that to ignore a danger were the same as banishing it, or as if theology (like the Italian cities when the emperors were threatening them and they continued to carry on their little contests between themselves over bits of land and what not) were ignoring the overwhelming danger which threatens entire destruction, to devote its strength to disputes which are, at best, of passing importance only. It sometimes even seems as if the apologist had only himself in mind, and was only justifying himself in his own eyes for holding on to old positions. Such an apologetic is obscurantist.

To put the issue between the old and the new as sharply as possible, we may summarize it as follows:

1. It is not what the evangelical system *is*; but whether it is *true*. It may fairly be claimed that the meaning of the Bible upon the basis of the current idea of inspiration is well understood, and that there is little dispute about it. Even if this were subject to doubt, it would remain certain that the modern position does not concern points upon which such denominations as the Baptists, Methodists, and Congregational-

ists differ, but those upon which they and even their great antagonists, the Roman Catholics, agree. Is the whole idea of a personal interference by God in history for man's salvation true? That is the question; and no discussions whether the New Testament teaches or does not teach the virgin birth of Jesus will help in the slightest in answering it.

2. It is not what the Bible teaches; but whether it possesses authority to control opinions. If the idea of law is consistently applied to theology, and the progress of man's mind in religion is like that in the knowledge of electricity, then every truth stands upon the authority of its own evidence, and nothing is believed because any man or any book declares it. Hence the authority of the Bible disappears. It becomes a light for our illumination, but what light we receive from it is recognized by its own shining, not because the book gives it.

3. It is not what may be regarded as a probable or a pleasant result of speculation, but what has some degree of rigid proof. There are some who are quite upon the basis of modern thought in other respects, who defend the doctrine of the trinity upon the (general, sometimes very general) Hegelian basis of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Pure Being (thesis), Concrete Being (antithesis), the Conscious Universe (Synthesis) are said to be the true meaning of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is called Trinitarianism. It ought not to be accepted as such by evangelical theologians, for it has no connection with the Pauline-Johannine doctrine of incarnation; but, if it is accepted by any as such, it would have no pertinence in meeting the issue with the current of thinking in the modern world, for it is an unproved speculation.

4. It is not what it is impossible to deny; but what it is necessary to affirm. A friend of the writer once wrote him as follows, putting the matter as well, in its way, as anybody can. He wrote: "I don't know how particles of matter might be carbonized or otherwise altered so as to change water into wine . . . but neither do I (or you, or anybody) know that it cannot be done harmoniously with, and by the use of deep laws which lie within and around laboratory laws. And if it happened that Jesus knew those deeper laws and used them, his knowledge and use of them (and not the mere physical phenomena) would be the real 'sign.'" The same argument is sometimes put more briefly thus: "Miracles are possible, for God is personal; therefore you *can't say* that they have *not* been actual." True, but can you say they *have* been actual? Can my friend say there *are* any such deep laws as

he has suggested? He may do something to sustain his position before himself, but he does actually nothing for the meeting of the modern objection, because that is after not *possibilities* but *truth*. We seek not what can be "defended," but what can be maintained.

That the considerations which have already been presented are not mere abstractions, but that modern apology is actually afflicted with marked obscurantism, is made evident by one of the most important volumes appearing in recent years upon the evangelical side, Principal Forsyth's *Person and Place of Christ*. To onlookers from this side of the Atlantic the author seems to be a prominent leader of religious thought in British dissent. He has appeared with great acceptance upon this side of the water on a number of occasions. He was selected to give the opening address at the International Congregational Council of 1908 in Edinburgh that he might strike the keynote of that assembly. He is a man of learning and power, and, what is more, of profound religious earnestness. He "desires," no doubt, to further the truth; but the "tendency" of this book is obscurantist. Of this alone we would speak.

The first half of the work is chiefly apologetic, the second half chiefly constructive. It seems at times as if the book (if we may thus distinguish it from the permanent position of the author's mind, of which we desire to say nothing critical) were aware of the true issue. We read (p. 103): "We are making a choice between the New Testament and the modern critical school." Of course, this implies that if we choose the critical school, we choose it as a whole, and this certainly implies its deep, fundamental principles. And hence the answer to it, and the reasons why it is to be rejected, if it is so, should be concerned with these first principles of criticism, of which the very first is the idea of law. Again we read (pp. 140, 141):

What we really believe is the gospel which, with the new soul, called the Bible also into being, and for whose sake it exists. It is not the church. For the books of the Bible were given to the church, more than by it, and they descended on it rather than rose from it. The canon of the Bible rose from the church, but not its contents. Bible and church were collateral products of the gospel. But we go on. Having fixed in the New Testament on what was held to be of faith and central to faith, we must ask, *was it true?*

This encourages us to hope that possibly we are yet to have, after a deal of discussion that did not meet the modern issue—indeed, that seemed absolutely ignorant of what it was—a final meeting of the demand of the modern time, to know whether the doctrines of the church are

true. But we are immediately disillusioned, for the remainder of the paragraph is: "How far is that theological faith a *true interpretation* of the historical Jesus Christ? Does it assign to Jesus Christ *what he himself claimed, or wished claimed*, when we read him as a whole?" Truth passes over here to "true interpretation," which is something very different; and the whole investigation is narrowed to what Jesus "claimed." But were his claims *true*? that is the very question of the modern time. The book is, then, not upon the quest of the truth, except upon the orthodox supposition as to the nature of Christ and revelation, and these are but *one form of the very point at issue!* And again we read:

If they (the apostles) were right about the source of their knowledge they were right about the object of it; these were one and the same. *It is a great "if," I admit.* If they were wrong about their authority and their centre, the outlying pieties of such fanatics [the word is the book's, not mine] have little moral worth, however beautiful. If they were wrong there, they were of little value anywhere else, except among the pieties and beauties of faith, which, however, do not need the apostles to their warrant, but appeal directly enough to our spiritual aesthetic. Only they do not lift us above an aesthetic religion."

Now, one would certainly expect some investigation of that "great if"; was Paul, for example, right about the source of his knowledge? Did he receive it direct from Christ, whom he "saw" upon the road to Damascus? Or was it the combination of his own mind to which he wrongly ascribed objectivity? Are the divine experiences which he referred to the present fellowships of Christ properly the results of that fellowship, or rather of the direct fellowship of the Father, whose Holy Spirit, that is, himself, is present with blessing in the hearts of his children? If Christ was truly God and taught what the early church thought about himself, the "if" is established; but, *were* these things so? That is the modern question; but one will look in vain through the 357 pages of this work for anything like an answer. And yet that answer ought to be the very heart of the book.

This relative appreciation of the true issue on the part of the book will be evident from the following passage:

The evolutionary idea is certainly compatible with Christianity; but not so long as it claims to be the supreme idea, to which Christianity must be shaped. Evolution is within Christianity, but Christianity is not within evolution. For evolution means the rule of a levelling relativism, which takes from Christ his absolute value and final place, reduces him to be but a stage of God's revelation, or a phase of it that can be outgrown, and makes

him the less of a creator as it ranges him vividly in the scale of the creature. There is no such foe to Christianity in thought today as this idea is; and we can make no terms with it so long as it claims the throne (pp. 10, 11).

One expects after this some discussion, some brief discussion, perhaps, but at least some discussion, of the antithesis between evolution and Christianity as to their relative truth; but he finds *none*.

The following passage gives so excellent a picture of the times that its full quotation seems desirable:

In the name of a simplicity which is not Christ's, lay Christianity is ceasing to be even the priesthood of each believer in virtue of the priesthood of Christ. It is coming to be understood as the rejection of apostolic, mediatorial, atoning Christianity and the sanctification of natural piety—sometimes only its refinement. It is more preoccupied with ethical conduct than with moral malady, with the fundamental truths of religion than with the fontal truths of mercy. And whereas we used to be able to appeal to our laymen and their experience against a Socinian and undogmatic and non-mediatorial Christianity, we can now appeal to them only against a sacerdotal and clerical. We used to be able to take refuge from Arianism (to which the ministers of the church might be tempted by certain philosophies) in the evangelical experience of its members. We used to think that the sense of sin which was lost from the intellectuals or the worldlings would be found among the Christian men who were in lay contact with the world—its temptations, its relapses, and its tragedies. But experience hardly now bears out this hope. Perhaps the general conscience has succumbed to the cheap comforts and varied interests of life; or the modern stress on the sympathies has muffled the moral note; or the decency of life has stifled the need of mercy; or Christian liberty has in the liberty lost the Christ. But whatever the cause, the lay mind becomes only too ready to interpret sin in a softer light than God's and to see it only under the pity of a Lord to whom judgment is quite a strange work, and who forgives all because he knows all. It is on a broken reed we too often lean when we turn from the theologian's "subtleties" to rely on the layman's faith. For the layman becomes slow to own a faith which begins in repentance rather than in benevolence. He is slow to confess a sin which is more than backwardness, untowardness, or ignorance. The number grows of high and clean-living youths who cherish an ideal Christianity but feel no need for an historic and perennial Christ. The tendency of the lay mind is backward to the eighteenth century, to a wise, and humane, and urbane religion, only enlarged by all the ideality and fraternity that enlarge Deism to modern Theism, etc. (Pp. 13, 14).

Barring some particulars of interpretation, one must say that this is a true picture of our times. And one would think that it would be followed by at least the *raising* of the question as to the validity of this new experience. May not Christians be growing? May not this new

type of piety be more in accordance with actual truth than the old? Certainly it is an impeachment of the evangelical theology, if its own sons, trained in its churches, and altogether friendly to it, indeed supposing themselves still to hold it, as they principally do, are in fact so widely separated from it, if its cardinal ideas find no real echo in their minds, and if they are actually living upon an altogether new basis of conception and principle! This is one of the profoundest questions before the evangelical communions. Is it a fact that men whom you theoretically call lost men, that is, men who do not believe in Christ in your sense, are enrolled in your churches, take the Lord's Supper from you, stand in your pulpits, and occupy the chairs of instruction in your theological seminaries? And are they, tested by their "fruits," as good Christians as the rest, or even better? Is your theology already practically repudiated? And is that which life has repudiated to be longer held as the revealed truth of God? One would expect such a discussion as that after the passage quoted, but the actual treatment of the subject is quite another. Read:

It (this "lay religion") regards Christ as the most inspired of the prophets of God's love, the most radical of social reformers, and the noblest of elder brothers. Whereas *the church must stand* on Christ the priest, his sacrifice, and his redemption; and it could not stand, as it did not arise, upon Christ the beneficent prophet or noble martyr. . . . I am trying to avoid the dogmatism of dogma. But I am also striving concisely to sharpen the issue, to be explicit and clear and to point the choice the church *must* make or go under.

That is, the question of the *truth* of those other positions is after all *not to be raised*. "The church *must stand* on Christ"—why? We are not told, nor is anything said which can throw light upon the success of those churches which have in recent times thrown off the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ. It "could not stand, as it *did not arise*"—is it then certain that traditional history has given us the true account of the rise of the church? The modern spirit expresses doubt at this point, and cannot be met by a mere assumption. But the book makes it. The unchanging position of the church is assumed without proof, and the purpose of the book is to maintain it. That is to darken counsel by words without knowledge. It is the "tendency to resist progress," obscurantism.

There was once an apology which might have been repeated here. It began by establishing the being and personality of God; then advanced to his benevolence; then exhibited the need of salvation on the part of sinful and miserable men; then the necessity of revelation as requisite

to man's salvation; and concluded with the actuality of revelation as attested by miracles. That was in its time a respectable argument. Today it seems antiquated. It is seldom brought forward by the defenders of the evangelical system although it is still the silent assumption upon which all their apology rests. Miracles in particular are much discussed. Various definitions are given of them which shall avoid the implication that they are a *violation* of the laws of nature. Sometimes their office in attesting revelation is blurred. But it remains that they are, whatever their occasion or design, proofs of the divine quality of the message of prophets and of Christ, "signs," and that they must be what God alone, and not man, however great his knowledge, could do, else they are no sign that God is the authority for the prophet's words. But what God only can do is still his personal interference in the course of things, and thus violates nature after all. A thorough-going discussion of the personality of God, of the meaning of salvation, and of the necessity of the church's idea of revelation to salvation, is absolutely essential before one can make the fundamental assumptions of this book in the present age. But of such discussions, the book contains not a trace.

One remaining point of this work we must mention. It is the very proper insistence upon the unity of the New Testament. Attention is called to the fact that, on account of the priority of the appearance of the Pauline epistles, "the three gospels were written for [and by] people living in the theological atmosphere of the epistles" (p. 175). It has long been recognized that the Johannine gospel is essentially Pauline; and it is rightfully maintained that the synoptic gospel is also Pauline. Hence it is impossible to separate out a synoptic Christ and say that he is the real Christ in distinction from the Christ of the epistles. So the book maintains, and this position will probably be acknowledged finally by all parties. The simple dates at which the books are held by the best critics (Harnack, for example) to have been written is enough to render this certain. But the book takes a peculiar turn at this point. It maintains that this view of the ultimate and heavenly Christ, this theology of a priest and a sacrifice, is to be accepted, being once understood as the true voice of the whole New Testament, not merely as that voice but as the absolute and final theology. Upon what ground? This is the question which modern thought has accustomed itself to ask at every stage of every investigation. No explicit answer is given to this question; but the implicit answer is, the divine authority of the New Testament—the very point at issue with the new thought!

One might have expected from a thorough treatment of the subject

that the matter would assume some such form as the following: Paul's conceptions lie evidently at the basis of the whole New Testament view of Christ. He was the greatest mind of all the apostles, he early formed his views, he preached them more widely than any other, he wrote them down in his epistles some years before the first brief gospel appeared, and thus his influence dominated the church and formed its theology. Everything therefore turns upon Paul's views. How extremely important to know whether they were correct! Where did he get them? for what reasons adopt them? in what agreement find himself with those about him? What can be said for them upon the ground of the Old Testament? To what extent is the miraculous element necessary to their development, and what was Paul's personal relation to miracles? An examination of such points should next follow.

Now, such an examination would naturally take into consideration the question whether Paul does not disconnect his view of Christ from objective sources of information ("not from men, neither through man," Gal. 1:1); whether he did not actually form his view of Christ in consequence of a vision which he had on the road to Damascus; and if so, what is the validity of this vision-experience? Charles G. Finney, for example, believed he saw Jesus Christ in his room at the time of his conversion, "fell down at his feet and poured out his soul to him"; and this lasted for a considerable time (*Memoirs*, 19, 20). Do we for a moment believe that he actually saw Christ? True, Finney himself afterward saw that the vision was "wholly a mental state," and Paul did not. But shall we believe this of one and not of the other? Our book ought really to take this matter up.

But we have nothing of the sort, the New Testament doctrine, in order to establish its unity, is referred to its original source; but when the pyramid has thus been set up upon its apex, no investigation is made as to whether the single stone which is thus to bear the weight of it all, is capable of sustaining so great a burden. This is *the very point at issue*, and is simply *assumed!*

But perhaps, ere we leave this book, there ought to be a plain answer given to a certain question which it puts:

You say that the one legacy of Jesus was a doctrine of the Father, reinforced by the powerful personality of the prophet. *Why* do you say that? What entitles you to say that the great thing Jesus brought the world was a doctrine, a doctrine rather than a deed, and that he left as his achievement his principle rather than his person? You admit that it was not the view of the apostles, nor of the first church; it was not the view of those who received whatever legacy he did leave. You are coming to admit that it was not the

view of the Synoptists. Why do you say they were all of them wrong? (p. 118).

Shall we put the answer as bluntly as a modernist, out of his deep earnestness and out of the sadness of a controversy troubled by the methods of obscurantism, would be likely to put it? He might say: Because I know that Jesus was a man and a prophet. But the idea that he was more, that he was qualified to make his person the object of his doctrine by his possession of a divine nature, I see no shred of a reason for accepting. It is suggested by writings which were written long after his death, by persons who never saw him, upon reports coming to them by unknown channels, and which are full of stories to which I can give no credence, and which base their attempts to prove their various positions as to his person by misquotations and bad exegesis of Old Testament passages. It is a doctrine which detracts from the fatherhood of God, since it makes him unwilling or unable to forgive except when bought off in some unexplainable way. I trace it all to a man who never saw Christ, who quarreled with the earliest apostles, upon his own testimony, as to certain fundamental ideas of the system, and whose personal capacity to testify to so great a doctrine as this theory of the supernatural being and nature of Christ is questionable. I say that "they were all of them wrong" because *not a particle of proof is advanced to show that they were right* which deserves the attention of a sober man.

In turn we ask, *Why* does not our book take up *that* answer?

And so we leave this book. It has nothing for the times. It is a great blunder—a terrible blunder, if evangelicalism is, after all, true; for it has confirmed and hardened the intellectual opposition of the times to that system. And, whatever may be true, it is a sad blunder; for it has failed to further the truth because it has not faced the true issue and sought out the real facts and learned thereby. Every discussion which does not further the truth in some way, damages it. Many a man has already risen from the reading of this book with the verdict, "It has nothing for me," and with the somewhat strengthened conviction that nothing can really be said in our day for the evangelical system. It is a pity to have such a conclusion reached after a sham battle! It were much better for all concerned if the conclusion came after a downright and genuine struggle between the opposing forces, whether it should lead to a victory or a defeat, a square, open defeat, for evangelicalism.

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